

Anarcho-syndicalism - an introduction



A short explanation of anarcho-syndicalism and notes on its history.

Anarcho-syndicalism is one of the major forms of social anarchism. The idea behind anarcho-syndicalism is to combine the economic methods of [syndicalism](#) with the revolutionary politics of [anarchism](#). This leads anarcho-syndicalists to be involved in everything from small propaganda groups to mass revolutionary unions, always organised according to anarchist principles, on a decentralised, federated basis.

Anarcho-syndicalism developed out of Revolutionary Syndicalism, however whereas Revolutionary Syndicalists rejected any politics in the union (in the 1906 Charter of Amiens), anarcho-syndicalists insisted that any organisation of workers must have explicitly revolutionary politics lest it lapse into reformism and collaboration with the ruling class. Following the Revolutionary Syndicalist CGT's support for World War One, against the anarchist principle of international working class solidarity, the [Spanish CNT](#) voted in 1923 to adopt libertarian communism (anarchism) as its explicit goal.

While anarcho-syndicalists advocate similar tactics to syndicalists, their revolutionary politics mean they don't aim to recruit all workers into 'One Big Union.' Instead, they try and organise alongside non-anarcho-syndicalist workers by advocating mass meetings, factory committees and workers' councils which unite all workers. Commenting on the [Russian Revolution](#), Russian anarcho-syndicalist [GP Maximov](#) wrote that:

It is a noteworthy feature of the revolution that despite the rather small influence of Anarchists on the masses before its out break, it followed from its inception the anarchistic course of full decentralisation: the revolutionary bodies immediately pushed to the front by the course of revolution were Anarcho-Syndicalist in their essential character. These were of the kind which lend themselves as adequate instruments for the quickest realisation of the Anarchist ideal - Soviets, Factory Committees, peasant land committees and house committees, etc.



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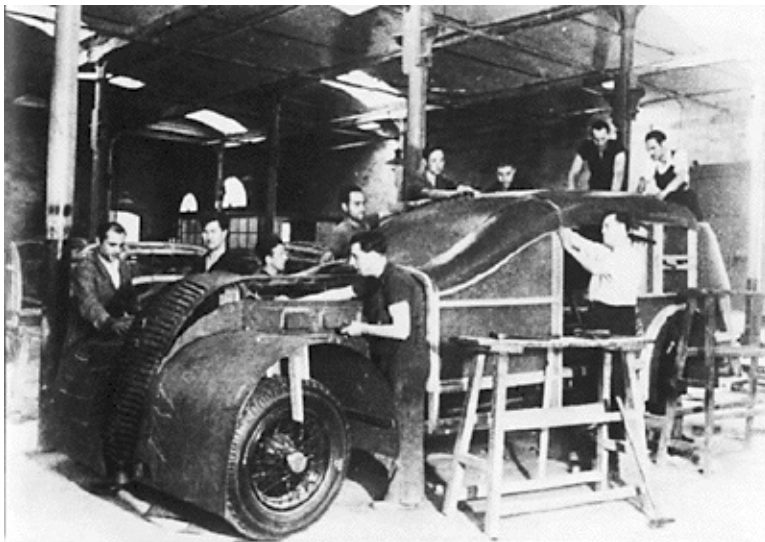
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At its foundation in 1922, the International Workers' Association (IWA) committed itself to

"the establishment of economic communities and administrative organs run by the workers in the field and factories, forming a system of free councils without subordination to any authority or political party, bar none." In more recent times, the late 1980s saw the CNT

organise mass assemblies in the workplace and community during the Puerto Real dockyard struggles.

Spain 1936 - anarcho-syndicalist workers in the CNT

construct armoured cars to fight the fascists in one of the

collectivised factories

Another important element of anarcho-syndicalism is that it doesn't limit itself to workplace activity, seeing tactics such as rent strikes and unemployed organising as means to further working class demands outside the workplace, alongside the more typically syndicalist direct action of strikes, occupations and sabotage by workers at the point of production.

The aim of the anarcho-syndicalist union is not just to win improved conditions. It would also serve as "*the elementary school of Socialism*" (Rudolf Rocker, *Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism*). In this way, anarcho-syndicalist unions aim to 'create the new world in the shell of the old' and they take very seriously Bakunin's remark that the workers'

organisations must create "*not only the ideas but also the facts of the future*" in the pre-revolutionary period. The organisation of the union would prepare workers for the direct democracy, self-activity and mutual aid needed if the future society is to succeed.

Anarcho-syndicalists, like all libertarian communists, "*are convinced that a Socialist economic order cannot be created by the decrees and statutes of a government, but only by...*

the taking over of the management of all plants by the producers themselves" (Rocker, *ibid.*).

Political parties are not just unnecessary for social change, but actually hold it back. These parties (even those claiming to represent the workers) stifle working class self-activity by attempting to either negotiate with government or by trying to lead the working class to victory.

Anarcho-syndicalists believe that workers should take direct action to get better conditions at work and win social and political demands (while always having revolution and workers'

control as their final goal). An example of this would be the Spanish CNT

(National Confederation of Labour) striking for the release of political prisoners in the beginning of the 20th Century, and British construction workers doing the same in the 1970s. Other recent

political strikes include general strikes against the second Iraq war in Italy, Spain and Germany.

Between 1905 and 1939, anarcho-syndicalism gained itself a very prominent position in the workers' movements of France, Italy and Spain (the CNT playing a leading role in the Spanish Civil War and Revolution in 1936-39) as well as in Latin America where anarchism was the predominant force in the workers' movement in many countries (such as in Argentina, Brazil and, to some extent, Peru). Today, though not as powerful a force as it once was, it still plays a significant role in workers' struggles in areas of Western Europe.

More information

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What is the CNT? - CNT-AIT - English translation of ¿Qué es la CNT? introduction to the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist union.

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A history of anarcho-syndicalism - Solidarity Federation - Excellent 24 unit course on the history of anarcho-syndicalism and its influence on workers struggles around the world.

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Anarcho-syndicalism in the 20th Century - Vadim Damier - Superb critical study of anarcho-syndicalism - highly recommended.

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Anarcho-Syndicalism - Rudolf Rocker - Classic extended work of Rudolf Rocker on anarcho-syndicalism.

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Revolutionary unionism in Latin America - the FORA in Argentina - Solidarity Federation - Excellent pamphlet on the development of the Argentinian workers' movement and the anarcho-syndicalist FORA.